

Even when things seem to be going well, people have ideas of ways to improve them. There are times when something needs to change because things are bogged down or destructive. Leaders then are relied upon to interrupt what is happening so that momentum doesn't carry the situation along. When leaders interrupt, they are making interventions that open up situations to the possibility for change.

History and Background

In every organization's or individual's life there are times when everything just drags along and nothing seems to be happening. A committee can continue to meet week after week but have no signs of results after several months. There are other times when the momentum is building in a situation which is destructive. It may be that since Ed has been teaching the fifth grade class, the attendance has dropped off from 15 to three or four. There are rumors that he is always putting down what the children say. In these cases, and in others like them, something needs to be done.

Kinds of Interventions

There are five basic kinds of interventions: listening, advising, facilitating, teaching and confronting.

It is not enough just to interrupt the situation. You need to be able to choose the appropriate intervention.

Listening Interventions

When you make a listening intervention, you help people know that you care enough to hear and understand what is on their minds. That's what happened when Scott was prepared to make a proposal to the association committee on environmental concerns. Just as he was leaving home, his sister Lynn called to say that his mother had been in an automobile accident. While she was seriously injured, there was no way for him to try to catch a plane to be with her. Scott had been working on the proposal for several months, and people had come from over a hundred miles to hear what he had to say. As soon as Scott opened the church door, Dorothy sensed something was wrong. All it took from Dorothy was permission to talk, "Hey, what's wrong, you look upset." Scott talked with Dorothy and then was ready to get on with his presentation.

Listening also helps when people just need to think through a situation. When things are muddled, it sometimes helps just to talk aloud to help get clarity. All the person who intervenes needs to do is listen.

Advisory Interventions

An advisory intervention gives valued advice. That's helpful when people don't have the information needed to move ahead with comfort.

For months the Christian education committee had been toying with the idea of an intergenerational class on peace, but they had never tried a class with all ages before. They kept talking, but no plans were being made. Finally, Joyce offered to see whether her friend from the Presbyterian Church could meet with them. First Presbyterian had been having intergenerational classes for two years, Joyce wasn't sure they'd offered one on peace, "but anyone with experience in that kind of class surely could help us know the first steps."

Sometimes the people who intervene offer advice personally because they have the expertise needed. At other times they find someone who has the expertise to intervene. Sometimes the intervention is training or material to be read, rather than an expert.

An advisory intervention assumes that you have heard the situation correctly and you offer advice that will help change it.

Facilitative Interventions

You make a facilitative intervention when people want to figure things out for themselves, but are looking for someone who will help them uncover their thoughts and feelings about the situation. They do not want someone to tell them what to do. They want someone who can help them with procedures that facilitate their coming to their own conclusions. You could use facilitative interventions as a leader at

a planning retreat. If so, you won't do the planning, but you will ask questions that will guide the group: "What do you want to accomplish?" "Why?" "What are your options?" "Which will you choose and why?" "Who will do what by when?"

The facilitative intervention does not include opinions about the concern facing the group. It offers ways to help others reach their own conclusions.

Teaching Interventions

A teaching intervention offers people information related to a particular concern that they can apply at their discretion. If your committee is bogged down, you may teach planning principles that members can apply in the committee (and on their jobs and in their families). You may teach people about world hunger or baptism or about the World Council of Churches. The teaching intervention provides a new awareness or new knowledge that can be applied to a specific situation and at other times.

Confronting Interventions

You confront people when you challenge the adequacy and faithfulness of what they value and understand. One of the first people we might think about who used confrontation is Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who intervened in a society bogged down by racial prejudice. This kind of intervention is risk laden. It has played a major role in the life of the church and has brought

about major change. It can also result in conflict if not used with love and care.

There may be times when a confronting intervention seems necessary in your church. When many Salvadorans came into the United States illegally to avoid being killed, some church members confronted other members of their churches, saying “We must do something. We can’t sit here and do nothing.” At such times church leaders feel called upon to question the values of groups in the church.

Choosing to Intervene

In addition to choosing a type of intervention, you need to determine precisely with whom to make the intervention. Do you need to intervene with only one person, a group, a number of groups or the whole organization?

Sometimes the answer will be obvious. When Scott was upset, Dorothy needed to speak only to Scott. But what happens when the choir director asks the worship committee chairperson for advice in choosing the music for the year? Should the chairperson offer her personal advice or should she advise the director to bring her request to the entire worship committee?

Sometimes it is difficult to sort out exactly what the issue is that calls for an intervention. Six people on the Christian education committee may be certain of the steps to take in planning an intergenerational class,

but the chairperson doesn’t really want to give up teaching the adult class, so he’s dragging his feet. In this case the group doesn’t need an outsider to come with a teaching intervention on how to set up an intergenerational class. Before making an intervention, you must attempt to understand the basic issue.

Interventions stand the best chance for success when they are requested. When you’re asked to intervene, try to be clear about what kind of intervention to make, with whom to make it and what the issues are.

There will be times when interventions are not requested, and you will need to ask permission to make one. “Would it be helpful if we took the time to hear each other out?” “Would it help if we sought some advice on this?” “I think we could discover a clearer picture of what we’re talking about if I could ask a series of questions. Do you mind if I try?”

Suggestions for Making Interventions

- Practice watching for different kinds of interventions people make and observe their impact.
- Think about what you know about the situation, so you will know when you are able to offer advice and when you need to refer people to someone else for advice.
- Develop a series of questions that help to facilitate people to arrive at their own conclusions.

- Know what it is that you and others can teach.
- Gain clarity, if you decide to make a confronting intervention, about what risks you are taking, and who else will be impacted. Do everything possible to value the people in the midst of the confrontation. When confronting values, it is very difficult to separate the individual from the values. Does the potential value of the intervention outweigh the risk of damaged relationships and conflict?
- Be aware when someone wants to change the intervention. You may agree to listen and then be asked for advice. When a change occurs, confirm that everyone involved knows about the change. Be clear that you are dealing with the right people and the right issue.

Issues Facing the Church

- How can you put your technical knowledge of interventions in its proper perspective as a tool to use in church settings?
- Confrontation is often difficult in church settings. How appropriate is it there? How can it best be accomplished?

Questions

- How can leaders and groups be open to interventions while still feeling capable and effective?

- Give illustrations of the five kinds of interventions from your experience. Consider which kinds make you feel the most comfortable.
- Think of a situation in your church in which people were bogged down or detrimental actions were in process. What kind of interventions were made? With and by whom? What happened?
- In the same situation, what kinds of interventions were needed? With and by whom? Over what?
- If your church has a pastoral relations committee, consider the ways in which they are asked to intervene. Do others in the church understand this committee’s role and accept these interventions?